

Cellulose, Eh?

IN THE CANADIAN WOODS, CONTEMPORARY ART GETS A BREATH OF FRESH AIR.

Hikers who set out to explore an unknown patch of woods tend to enjoy the subtle, unexpected nuances of nature, like a cluster of wildflowers or a hidden waterfall. But for the adventurous souls who trek through the 200 acres of forest at a place called the Tree Museum on Ryde Lake near the town of Gravenhurst, Ontario, periodic surprises come with a tad more voltage—like, say, a fiberglass rock that glows in the dark.

Since the Tree Museum's inception in 1998, numerous Ontario artists have contributed site-specific sculptures to the art-gallery-cum-wilderness-preserve that sits near a lake in a sparsely populated area north of Toronto. Collectively, the artists are reinventing the forest's field guide, one sculpture at a time. The permanent installations range from giant faux beehives to skeletons sandblasted onto forest stones.

Each year, artists congregate at the museum's rustic cabin and spend several months planning and planting a new set of sculpted surprises. The luminescent geology is part of this year's upcoming exhibit entitled "Shelter: Inside-Out," which will feature the work of five Canadian artists. E. J. Lightman, one of the



museum's founders, says that the sculptures in this year's show tend to emphasize the "out" more than the "inside." "When we gave them the title, I somehow imagined that [the artists] would make enclosures or tents," says Lightman. "None of them did that. All of them made pieces that push you out into the land."

The museum is open year-round, and visitors have to hike a kilometer into the forest before encountering any of the outdoor sculptures. This year's opening, scheduled for the fall, will cut down on the walking by including a horse-drawn wagon to ferry visitors to and fro. Nevertheless, Lightman recommends wearing hiking boots. The exhibit's kickoff will proceed regardless of the weather. "If it rains, well, we'll be walking in the rain. That's the chance you take with anything outdoors. This is the villain we face every year. Nature changes."

Like this year's exhibit, the history of the Tree Museum is itself rooted in the tension between human shelter and natural landscapes. The idea for the museum germinated in response to the insidious

form of human housing known as the condominium development. In 1997, Mentor College, a private school in Mississauga where Lightman teaches art, purchased a parcel of wilderness and planned to set up an outdoor education program. Shortly thereafter, a developer threatened to disrupt the general tranquility of the area with an onslaught of condominiums. Instead, Mentor College bought the adjacent land and, with the prompting of Lightman and Tree Museum cocurator Anne O'Callaghan, turned the wilderness into a preserve for free-range sculpture.

These days, for every sculpture in the forest, a small sign stands nearby offering a tidbit of explanatory text. Even so, some of the artwork is hard to locate. "You have to look around to find these things," says Lightman. "They are all spread out. That's what I love about this place—the magic of finding these sculptures in a beautiful landscape."

—FELIX GILLETTE

Have an idea for Riprap?

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